

Through a Window

H. G. Wells

After his legs were set, they carried Bailey into the study and put him on a couch before the open window. There he lay, a live—even a feverish man down to the loins, and below that a double-barrelled mummy swathed in white wrappings. He tried to read, even tried to write a little, but most of the time he looked out of the window.

He had thought the window cheerful to begin with, but now he thanked God for it many times a day. Within, the room was dim and grey, and in the reflected light, the wear of the furniture showed plainly. His medicine and drink stood on the little table, with such litter as the bare branches of a bunch of grapes, or the ashes of a cigar upon a green plate, or a day old evening paper. The view outside was flooded with light, and across the corner of it came the head of the acacia, and at the foot, the top of the balcony-railing of hammered iron. In the foreground was the weltering silver of the river, never quiet and yet never tiresome. Beyond was the reedy bank, a broad stretch of meadow land, and then a dark line of trees ending in a group of poplars at the distant bend of the river, and upstanding behind them, a square church tower.

Up and down the river, all day long, things were passing. Now a string of barges drifting down to London, piled with lime or barrels of beer; then a steam-launch, disengaging heavy masses of black smoke, and disturbing the whole width of the river with long rolling waves; then an impetuous electric launch, and then a boatload of pleasure-seekers, a solitary sculler, or a four from some rowing club. Perhaps the river was quietest of a morning or late at night. One moonlight night some people drifted down singing, and with a zither playing—it sounded very pleasantly across the water.

In a few days Bailey began to recognise some of the craft; in a week he knew the intimate history of half-a-dozen. The launch Luzon, from Fitzgibbon's, two miles up, would go fretting by, sometimes three or four times a day, conspicuous with its colouring of Indian-red and yellow, and its two Oriental attendants; and one day, to Bailey's vast amusement, the house-boat Purple Emperor came to a stop outside, and breakfasted in the most shameless domesticity. Then one afternoon, the captain of a slow-moving barge began a quarrel with his wife as they came into sight from the left, and had carried it to personal violence before he vanished behind the window-frame to the right. Bailey regarded all this as an entertainment got up to while away his illness, and applauded all the more, these moving incidents. Mrs. Green, coming in at rare intervals with his meals, would catch him clapping his hands or softly crying, "Encore!" But the river players had other engagements, and his encore went unheeded.

"I should never have thought I could take such an interest in things that did not concern me," said Baile to Wilderspin, who used to come in, in his nervous, friendly way and try to comfort

the sufferer by being talked to. "I thought this idle capacity was distinctive of little children and old maids. But it's just circumstances. I simply can't work, and things have to drift; it's no good to fret and struggle. And so I lie here and am as amused as a baby with a rattle, at this river and its affairs.

"Sometimes, of course, it gets a bit dull, but not often.

"I would give anything, Wilderspin, for a swamp—just one swamp—once. Heads swimming and a steam launch to the rescue, and a chap or so hauled out with a boat-hook...There goes Fitzgibbon's launch! They have a new boat-hook, I see, and the little blackie is still in the dumps. I don't think he's very well, Wilderspin. He's been like that for two or three days, squatting sulky-fashion and meditating over the churning of the water. Unwholesome for him to be always staring at the frothy water running away from the stern."

They watched the little steamer fuss across the patch of sunlit river, suffer momentary occultation from the acacia, and glide out of sight behind the dark window-frame.

"I'm getting a wonderful eye for details," said Bailey: "I spotted that new boat-hook at once. The other n—— is a funny little chap. He never used to swagger with the old boat-hook like that."

"Malays, aren't they?" said Wilderspin.

"Don't know," said Bailey. "I thought one called all that sort of mariner Lascar."

Then he began to tell Wilderspin what he knew of the private affairs of the house-boat, Purple Emperor. "Funny," he said, "how these people come from all points of the compass—from Oxford and Windsor, from Asia and Africa—and gather and pass opposite the window just to entertain me. One man floated out of the infinite the day before yesterday, caught one perfect crab opposite, lost and recovered a scull, and passed on again. Probably he will never come into my life again. So far as I am concerned, he has lived and had his little troubles, perhaps thirty—perhaps forty—years on the earth, merely to make an ass of himself for three minutes in front of my window. Wonderful thing, Wilderspin, if you come to think of it."

"Yes," said Wilderspin; "isn't it?"

A day or two after this Bailey had a brilliant morning. Indeed, towards the end of the affair, it became almost as exciting as any window show, very well could be. We will, however begin at the beginning.

Bailey was all alone in the house, for his housekeeper had gone into the town three miles

away to pay bills, and the servant had her holiday. The morning began dull. A canoe went up about half-past nine, and later a boatload of camping men came down. But this was mere margin. Things became cheerful about ten o'clock.

It began with something white fluttering in the remote distance where the three poplars marked the river bend. "Pocket-handkerchief," said Bailey, when he saw it "No, too big! Flag perhaps."

However, it was not a flag, for it jumped about. "Man in whites running fast, and this way," said Bailey. "That's luck! But his whites are precious loose!"

Then a singular thing happened. There was a minute pink gleam among the dark trees in the distance, and a little puff of pale grey that began to drift and vanish eastward. The man in white jumped and continued running. Presently the report of the shot arrived.

"What the devil!" said Bailey. "Looks as if someone was shooting at him."

He sat up stiffly and stared hard. The white figure was coming along the pathway through the corn. "It's one of those n—s from the Fitzgibbon's," said Bailey; "or may I be hanged! I wonder why he keeps sawing with his arm."

Then three other figures became indistinctly visible against the dark background of the trees.

Abruptly on the opposite bank a man walked into the picture. He was black-bearded, dressed in flannels, had a red belt, and a vast, grey felt hat. He walked, leaning very much forward and with his hands swinging before him. Behind him one could see the grass swept by the towing-rope of the boat he was dragging. He was steadfastly regarding the white figure that was hurrying through the corn. Suddenly he stopped. Then, with a peculiar gesture, Bailey could see that he began pulling in the tow-rope hand over hand. Over the water could be heard the voices of the people in the still invisible boat.

"What are you after, Hagshot?" said someone.

The individual with the red belt shouted something that was inaudible, and went on lugging in the rope, looking over his shoulder at the advancing white figure as he did so. He came down the bank, and the rope bent a lane among the reeds and lashed the water between his pulls.

Then just the bows of the boat came into view, with the towing-mast and a tall, fair-haired man standing up and trying to see over the bank. The boat bumped unexpectedly among the reeds, and the tall, fair-haired man disappeared suddenly, having apparently fallen back

into the invisible part of the boat. There was a curse and some indistinct laughter. Hagshot did not laugh, but hastily clambered into the boat and pushed off. Abruptly the boat passed out of Bailey's sight.

But it was still audible. The melody of voices suggested that its occupants were busy telling each other what to do.

The running figure was drawing near the bank. Bailey could now see clearly that it was one of Fitzgibbon's Orientals, and began to realise what the sinuous thing the man carried in his hand might be. Three other men followed one another through the corn, and the foremost carried what was probably the gun. They were perhaps two hundred yards or more behind the Malay.

"It's a man hunt, by all that's holy!" said Bailey.

The Malay stopped for a moment and surveyed the bank to the right. Then he left the path, and breaking through the corn, vanished in that direction. The three pursuers followed suit, and their heads and gesticulating arms above the corn, after a brief interval, also went out of Bailey's field of vision.

Bailey so far forgot himself as to swear. "Just as things were getting lively!" he said. Something like a woman's shriek came through the air. Then shouts, a howl, a dull whack upon the balcony outside that made Bailey jump, and then the report of a gun.

"This is precious hard on an invalid," said Bailey.

But more was to happen yet in his picture. In fact, a great deal more. The Malay appeared again, running now along the bank up stream. His stride had more swing and less pace in it than before. He was threatening someone ahead with the ugly krees he carried. The blade, Bailey noticed, was dull—it did not shine as steel should.

Then came the tall, fair man, brandishing a boat-hook, and after him three other men in boating costume, running clumsily with oars. The man with the grey hat and red belt was not with them. After an interval the three men with the gun reappeared, still in the corn, but now near the river bank. They emerged upon the towing-path, and hurried after the others. The opposite bank was left blank and desolate again.

The sick-room was disgraced by more profanity. "I would give my life to see the end of this," said Bailey. There were indistinct shouts up stream. Once they seemed to be coming nearer, but they disappointed him.

Bailey sat and grumbled. He was still grumbling when his eye caught something black and

round among the waves. “Hullo!” he said. He looked narrowly and saw two triangular black bodies frothing every now and then about a yard in front of this.

He was still doubtful when the little band of pursuers came into sight again, and began to point to this floating object. They were talking eagerly. Then the man with the gun took aim.

“He’s swimming the river, by George!” said Bailey.

The Malay looked round, saw the gun, and went under. He came up so close to Bailey’s bank of the river that one of the bars of the balcony hid him for a moment. As he emerged the man with the gun fired. The Malay kept steadily onward—Bailey could see the wet hair on his forehead now and the knees between his teeth—and was presently hidden by the balcony.

This seemed to Bailey an unendurable wrong. The man was lost to him for ever now, so he thought. Why couldn’t the brute have got himself decently caught on the opposite bank, or shot in the water?

“It’s worse than Edwin Drood,” said Bailey.

Over the river, too, things had become an absolute blank. All seven men had gone down stream again, probably to get the boat and follow across. Bailey listened and waited. There was silence. “Surely it’s not over like this,” said Bailey.

Five minutes passed—ten minutes. Then a tug with two barges went up stream. The attitudes of the men upon these were the attitudes of those who see nothing remarkable in earth, water, or sky. Clearly the whole affair had passed out of sight of the river. Probably the hunt had gone into the beech woods behind the house.

“Confound it!” said Bailey. “To be continued again, and no chance this time of the sequel. But this is hard on a sick man.”

He heard a step on the staircase behind him and looking round saw the door open. Mrs. Green came in and sat down, panting. She still had her bonnet on, her purse in her hand, and her little brown basket upon her arm. “Oh, there!” she said, and left Bailey to imagine the rest.

“Have a little whisky and water, Mrs. Green, and tell me about it,” said Bailey.

Sipping a little, the lady began to recover her powers of explanation.

One of those black creatures at the Fitzgibbon's had gone mad, and was running about with a big knife, stabbing people. He had killed a groom, and stabbed the under-butler, and almost cut the arm off a boating gentleman.

"Running amuck with a krees," said Bailey. "I thought that was it."

And he was hiding in the wood when she came through it from the town.

"What! Did he run after you?" asked Bailey, with a certain touch of glee in his voice.

"No, that was the horrible part of it." Mrs. Green explained. She had been right through the woods and had never known he was there. It was only when she met young Mr. Fitzgibbon carrying his gun in the shrubbery that she heard anything about it. Apparently, what upset Mrs. Green was the lost opportunity for emotion. She was determined, however, to make the most of what was left her.

"To think he was there all the time!" she said, over and over again.

Bailey endured this patiently enough for perhaps ten minutes. At last he thought it advisable to assert himself. "It's twenty past one, Mrs. Green," he said. "Don't you think it time you got me something to eat?"

This brought Mrs. Green suddenly to her knees.

"Oh Lord, sir!" she said. "Oh! Don't go making me go out of this room sir, till I know he's caught. He might have got into the house, sir. He might be creeping, creeping, with that knife of his, along the passage this very—"

She broke off suddenly and glared over him at the window. Her lower jaw dropped. Bailey turned his head sharply.

For the space of half a second things seemed just as they were. There was the tree, the balcony, the shining river, the distant church tower. Then he noticed that the acacia was displaced about a foot to the right, and that it was quivering, and the leaves were rustling. The tree was shaken violently, and a heavy panting was audible.

In another moment a hairy brown hand had appeared and clutched the balcony railings, and in another the face of the Malay was peering through these at the man on the couch. His expression was an unpleasant grin, by reason of the krees he held between his teeth, and he was bleeding from an ugly wound in his cheek. His hair wet to drying stuck out like horns from his head. His body was bare save for the wet trousers that clung to him. Bailey's first impulse was to spring from the couch, but his legs reminded him that this was impossible.

By means of the balcony and tree, the man slowly raised himself until he was visible to Mrs. Green. With a choking cry she made for the door and fumbled with the handle.

Bailey thought swiftly and clutched a medicine bottle in either hand. One he flung, and it smashed against the acacia. Silently and deliberately, and keeping his bright eyes fixed on Bailey, the Malay clambered into the balcony. Bailey, still clutching his second bottle, but with a sickening, sinking feeling about his heart, watched first one leg come over the railing and then the other.

It was Bailey's impression that the Malay took about an hour to get his second leg over the rail. The period that elapsed before the sitting position was changed to a standing one seemed enormous—days, weeks, possibly a year or so. Yet Bailey had no clear impression of anything going on in his mind during that vast period, except a vague wonder at his inability to throw the second medicine bottle. Suddenly the Malay glanced over his shoulder. There was the crack of a rifle. He flung up his arms and came down upon the couch. Mrs. Green began a dismal shriek that seemed likely to last until Doomsday. Bailey stared at the brown body with its shoulder blade driven in, that writhed painfully across his legs and rapidly staining and soaking the spotless bandages. Then he looked at the long krees, with the reddish streaks upon its blade, that lay an inch beyond the trembling brown fingers upon the floor. Then at Mrs. Green, who had backed hard against the door and was staring at the body and shrieking in gusty outbursts as if she would wake the dead. And then the body was shaken by one last convulsive effort.

The Malay gripped the krees, tried to raise himself with his left hand, and collapsed. Then he raised his head, stared for a moment at Mrs. Green, and twisting his face round looked at Bailey. With a gasping groan the dying man succeeded in clutching the bed clothes with his disabled hand, and by a violent effort, which hurt Bailey's legs exceedingly, writhed sideways towards what must be his last victim. Then something seemed released in Bailey's mind and he brought down the second bottle with all his strength on to the Malay's face. The krees fell heavily upon the floor.

"Easy with those legs," said Bailey, as young Fitzgibbon and one of the boating party lifted the body off him.

Young Fitzgibbon was very white in the face. "I didn't mean to kill him," he said.

"It's just as well," said Bailey.

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